

# Application of Theory to Develop and Implement the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign

## Introduction

THIS BRIEF DESCRIBES THE APPLICATION of a two-pronged theoretical approach to develop and implement the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (NYADMC). More specifically, the brief describes the NYADMC and its theoretical underpinning and explores how its theory base is used to empirically inform the development of specific advertisements and to create measures that evaluate their impact. The brief concludes with an example of this multifold process. The size and scope of the NYADMC provides a unique opportunity to explore its processes, and the findings of this exploration may inform other communication efforts to prevent drug abuse among teens. In the end, the brief provides a descriptive examination of the connection between theory and practice with the aim to prevent drug abuse by youth.

## The National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign

The NYADMC, which began in 1998, is a large-scale, national effort to use mass media and other public communications to prevent drug abuse among youth ages 12 to 17, with a special emphasis on 14 to 16 year-olds. The Office of National Drug Control Policy conducts the NYADMC under Congressional mandate and aims media messages through national paid advertising in multiple channels, such as television, radio, print, and internet/multimedia, at two audiences. First, the NYADMC disseminates messages directly to youth to discourage first time use of illicit drugs such as marijuana and to convince current drug users to stop using. Second, the campaign directs media messages to parents and other influential adults to build their efficacy to talk about the risks of drug use with their teens and to encourage parental behaviors, such as monitoring, that might decrease youth drug use. The NYADMC has great reach. In fact, the campaign estimates that, in 2008, 64 percent of teens in the target age range saw a campaign advertisement, and exposure averaged 2.6 times per week.

Since its inception, the NYADMC has been studied repeatedly. Some research shows evidence of its effectiveness alone (Palmgreen, et al. 2007) or combined with school-based prevention curricula (Longshore, et al., 2006). Other research suggests that the NYADMC causes no favorable changes in youth drug use and that the campaign ads might create a “norming” effect in which greater exposure to the ads relates to more positive attitudes to drug use overall in youth (Hornik et al., 2003).

The dispute over whether the NYADMC produces norming relates to the underlying complexity of any wide-scale social marketing media campaign. The campaign needs to develop and communicate prevention messages that have a high likelihood of prompting behavior change in social and media environments that present special challenges. The campaign also needs to create and deliver messages that have a low probability of iatrogenic or unintended effects. While norming is a significant concern, so too is metamessaging. Metamessaging is a process by which people absorb the implicit message from campaign communications that all teens use drugs. But theory may be used to guard against this challenge.

## Theoretical approach to campaign developmental and implementation

A key tenet of the NYADMC is its use of theory to develop and implement media messages and to reach its intended goals while avoiding unintended consequences. Its theoretical basis has evolved over time and now involves two key components: the theory of planned behavior (TPB) and the importance of social influence. Since its inception, the NYADMC has used TPB as a theoretical foundation. TPB suggests that exposure to persuasive information subsequently produces shifts in beliefs, intentions, and behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). By developing media messages aligned with elements of TPB, the media experts and researchers who work on the NYADMC theoretically positioned the campaign to reduce teen drug abuse.

To account for decision-making differences, the NYADMC modified its theoretical basis in 2005 to include intentions to avoid negative social influence. Including this additional intentions construct in the theoretical model and campaign messaging provides a more holistic approach to reduce drug use by accounting for rational and affective behavioral determinants. Indeed, social influences, exposure, and pressures play critical roles in the initiation and continuation of adolescent drug use (Hansen, 1992), and drug-prevention programs based on social influence approaches are generally successful in preventing substance use in teen populations (see Cujpers, 2002). Figure 1 shows the current theoretical conceptualization of the NYADMC that integrates TPB and recent decision-making research.

The theoretical basis of the campaign provides different platforms for messaging. Some advertisements contain anti-drug messages, while others focus on resisting negative social influences. Similarly, advertisements differentially focus on positive expectations of avoiding drugs like marijuana or the negative consequences of use. And while not every advertisement includes all elements of the NYADMC's theoretical foundation, all are tested for their ability to influence viewers' beliefs about youth drug abuse and to ensure that the advertisements avoid

Copytesting is also a key element in forging a connection between theory and practice in the campaign. In copytesting, final-format advertising is quantitatively tested using an experimental test/control design to determine the efficacy of the ads and the extent of unintended effects, such as contribution to a false norm about the prevalence of youth drug use or a heightened desirability to use drugs. The copytesting measures, which are drawn from the theoretical basis of the campaign, are designed to examine beliefs and intentions and to explore general and drug-specific influences in teens' lives, the social desirability of drug use, and the likelihood of drug use by self and in

- How do you think your close friends would feel about your using marijuana?

The diagram illustrates the Theory of Planned Behavior for drug use. On the left, three boxes labeled 'Normative Perceptions', 'Outcome Perceptions', and 'Self-Efficacy' are stacked vertically. Arrows from these three boxes point to a central box labeled 'INTENTIONS'. From the 'INTENTIONS' box, an arrow points to a box labeled 'USE'. Below the 'INTENTIONS' box, two boxes are shown: 'Decrease intent to use drugs' on the left and 'Increase intent to resist social influences about drug use' on the right. Arrows from these two boxes point up to the 'INTENTIONS' box. To the right of the 'USE' box, the text 'Decrease Drug Use' is written.

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graph LR; NP[Normative Perceptions] --> INT[INTENTIONS]; OP[Outcome Perceptions] --> INT; SE[Self-Efficacy] --> INT; INT --> USE[USE]; INT --> DIDI[Decrease intent to use drugs]; INT --> IIRSI[Increase intent to resist social influences about drug use]; DIDI --> INT; IIRSI --> INT; USE --- DDU[Decrease Drug Use]
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To illustrate the practical application of theory to design effective messages and to avoid unintended effects, consider “Whatever,” a 30-second ad from the NYADMC that features a



## Box 2: WHATEVER ad transcript

View online at [www.mediacampaign.org](http://www.mediacampaign.org)

Spot opens on a teenage boy driving his car. His friends are in the car with him, but we don't really see much of them

Teen Boy (talks directly to camera):

Some of my friends smoke weed and I don't. It's whatever. I drive the car so they won't have to get behind the wheel. I pick where we eat so they won't have to worry about choosin' a place. I'll tell them when we're heading out to the party so they don't have worry about being on top of the time or anything like that. And at the party, I'm the one talking to the all the ladies, and my boys just sit there... 'til it's time to go and I'm like "hey, get back in the car, man!" But basically, they don't have to worry about living life—I'll live it for 'em. Until I go to college, then ya'll somebody else's problem. But until then it's whatever.

SUPER: [abovetheinfluence.com](http://abovetheinfluence.com)

teen as the protagonist and narrator. He is shown driving a car and talking about his friends that use marijuana. Box 2 provides the transcript of the ad.

The content of the advertisement includes many of the theoretical constructs of TPB. For example, the ad addresses normative perceptions. Although some characters in the ad use marijuana, they do not appear on screen. More importantly, the protagonist does not use marijuana, which he clearly substantiates by saying, "Some of my friends smoke marijuana, and I don't." Both negative and positive outcome expectations are included in the advertisement. Marijuana users are described as missing out on the social scene, when the protagonist states, "and at the party, I'm the one talking to the all the ladies, and my boys just sit there." Moreover, the ad relates the avoidance of marijuana with high achievement, namely, the recognition that the protagonist is college bound. Finally, the ad depicts the protagonist modeling self-efficacy. He talks about how he takes care of his buddies without enabling drug use, saying "basically, they [his weed-using friends] don't have to worry about living life—I'll live it for 'em."

## Conclusion

This brief examines how theory may be used to inform the development and implementation of a wide-scale national mass media campaign, namely, the NYADMC. The two-pronged theoretical approach of NYADMC media messages, which is predicated on the statistical links among beliefs, attitudes, norms, intentions and behavior, may increase the likelihood of behavior change. In addition to increasing the efficacy of messages, theory can assist NYADMC from releasing advertising materials that produce unintended effects. In the end, this theoretically informed approach should be considered by other communication campaigns that aim to reduce teen drug use.

## Citations

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